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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000631

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PBTS](#) [ASEC](#) [AM](#) [AJ](#)

SUBJECT: CONVICTION OF ARMY OFFICER IN HUNGARY SPARKS SMALL PROTESTS

Classified By: CDA JASON HYLAND FOR REASONS 1.4 B AND D.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In a case closely followed by many Azerbaijanis, on April 13 a Hungarian court convicted Army Lieutenant Ramil Safarov to life imprisonment for the February 2004 murder of an Armenian officer during a NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) exercise. Azerbaijani media has followed every step of the case, including the independent ANS television station, which broadcasted from Budapest during the final days of the trial. The conviction sparked small protests in Azerbaijan, which were organized by the Karabakh Liberation Organization and opposition youth movements. While few GOAJ officials have commented on the case, the Prosecutor General's office has already announced its intention to seek extradition and the Parliament's Human Rights Commission intends to investigate the case. The strong feelings aroused by this case -- particularly as magnified by the media -- illustrate once again the difficulties the GOAJ will face in presenting a negotiated solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. END SUMMARY.

CRIME OF "UNUSUAL CRUELTY"

¶2. (U) In February 2004, Army Lieutenant Ramil Safarov, a bright 28-year old IDP originally from Jabrail who lost a number of relatives in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, was selected to attend a NATO PfP English-language course in Budapest. According to reports from the Budapest police and eye witnesses, Safarov hacked to death his Armenian counterpart with an ax and a knife, displaying "unusual cruelty," as the Armenian officer slept in his bed. At the time, Azerbaijani officials claimed the incident was provoked by the Armenian officer's taunting of Safarov; Armenian officials said the responsibility laid with bellicose propaganda from the GOAJ. On April 13, 2006, a Budapest court found Safarov guilty of the crime and sentenced him to life imprisonment with possibility for parole only after 30 years, the harshest sentence possible in Hungarian courts. The case is under appeal in Hungary.

SOCIETY INDIGNANT OVER "UNJUST" VERDICT

¶3. (C) Following the media coverage of the verdict, small protests have popped up both in Baku and in the regions, mostly in districts heavily populated by IDPs. While the regional protests have been relatively small and unobstructed, protests in Baku appear to have drawn several hundred participants each. Most of these have started at universities, seemingly organized by student groups and youth opposition groups. While responsibility for the protests has been difficult to nail down, we have heard that the main organizers have been students at Baku State University, the

"Dalga" opposition youth movement, the youth wing of the Karabakh Liberation Organization (KLO), and possibly some of the younger member of the Popular Front Party (PFP). The main organization of the KLO, headed by Akif Nagi, has been responsible for the more general protests throughout Baku.

¶4. (SBU) Police have exercised judicious restraint in dispersing the Baku rallies. Opposition newspapers have run a couple of pictures of youth with bloody heads, but the TV coverage we have seen has been fairly mild. Police generally let the protest advance a reasonable distance before regular, blue-shirted police pushed protesters to urge them to go home. We have yet to hear that police in riot gear have been involved in disrupting the rallies, all of which have been unsanctioned. During protests on April 14, Nagi and a fellow KLO member were arrested for resisting police. Some students were also detained over the course of the demonstrations; however, all appear to be have been released shortly afterwards.

EXPLOITING EMOTIONS?

¶5. (C) While protesters have chanted the expected "Free Safarov" and "Shame on Hungarian Justice," protests in Baku also have centered on criticism that the GOAJ did not give Safarov sufficient support to return a "not guilty" verdict. This criticism started in public statements made by opposition groups immediately after the announcement of the verdict, may have broader resonance. The ruling Azerbaijani elite has been uncharacteristically silent on the matter. The only official statements have been made by the Prosecutor General and the Minister of Justice, announcing they will seek extradition of Safarov following completion of the appeals process. (According to international conventions,

BAKU 00000631 002 OF 002

the GOAJ would not be able to commute Safarov's sentence.)

¶6. (C) As with most events connected to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, emotions are running high in Azerbaijan over the verdict and the sentence, even among those who have not turned to the streets in protest. The role of the news media, particularly ANS TV, has been very unhelpful: Much of the media coverage has contained the sentiment that Safarov was at best excused, at worst justified in his actions because of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Scant if any references to his confession or the details of his crime appear in Azerbaijani press. Instead, coverage focuses on Safarov's family circumstances (according to some media reports, 14 of his relatives were killed during the conflict) and the alleged Armenian taunting. A website created to publicize Safarov's plight, written in English and Russian, has quotes from Safarov justifying his actions and details some 80-year old cases where Armenians were found not guilty of killing Turkish and Azerbaijani officials.

¶7. (C) Most of the fuel to this fire has been added by the Azerbaijani media and staged protests. Nightly television propaganda has remained overtly nationalistic, indignant at the injustice done to a man who was "clearly provoked" by Armenian taunting. Additionally, according to one political observer who himself is an IDP, students at Baku State University and other institutions have been happy to skip class in order to partake in the protests. Some of the rally footage, which shows aggressive youth along side students who appear to be simply joining along, seems to support this hypothesis. The political observer with whom Poloff spoke surmised that the frenzy has been whipped up by elements in the GOAJ in order to show that public opinion overwhelmingly is against compromise and any action that would appear to vindicate Armenians over Azerbaijanis. The observer -- a lawyer who followed the case -- commented that the sentence was justifiable given the facts of the case, regardless of whether the victim was Armenian or not. However, he said in the face of slanted media coverage and few attempts to inject

reason into the debate, it has been difficult even for him to convince colleagues and friends to look at the case without nationalistic emotion.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) The past week's events have signaled yet again the extent to which the Azerbaijani public is ill-prepared for a negotiated solution to the conflict. We will continue to push GOAJ officials to begin educating their citizens on the need for compromise and reconciliation if there is going to be a negotiated and just peace, but this message remains a difficult sell.

HYLAND